

The road to great places has began

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What do you think of when you imagine a great place?

Is it the heart of an historic downtown, where funky new shops fill old spaces and the charm of the past drives an authentic new lifestyle? Is it a bustling urban center or a quaint neighborhood? Is it a quiet spot along an Iowa lake or stream, surrounded by the natural beauty of a native prairie and the sounds of wildlife?

Wherever it is, you know it when you're there; it radiates an energy that is almost tangible. A great place ignores boundaries such as county lines and city limits. Its spirit defines its existence and connects its heart and soul - a lake, arts district, history, culture - with its trails, streets, housing and parks. And it connects with you.

A great place can be beautiful or coarse, high brow or street corner strange. Its power and greatness are in its ability to offer visitors and residents an experience.

In January, Governor Tom Vilsack launched an unprecedented initiative: Iowa Great Places. He called on Iowans to be bold, innovative and entrepreneurial; to transform this state into a magnet for people. And he called on state government to become a true partner with the people of Iowa.

There are now 145 great place wannabees' who submitted applications to the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs asking for designation under the Iowa Great Places initiative, and among them are Carroll, Lake City, Lake View, Manning and Coon Rapids.

Locally, an initial Great Places group spearheaded by CRDG board members Doug Carpenter and Rachel Garst are gearing up to develop a Great Places offer due in September. Carpenter and Garst have assembled a Great Places team that is currently creating a Great Places profile. During the process of creating a 'profile', the Coon Rapids 'Great Places' committee must consider seven dimensions, and identify the strengths and

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Iowa Great Places' coaches representing two of the 18 involved state agencies were in Coon Rapids Monday to help local Great Places team members identify the next steps in preparation for the Great Places' offer that is due in September. From far left around the table clockwise: Jim Thacker, Mark Aspen, Sandy Altman, Great Places' Coach, Travis Castle, Great Places Coach, Laura Lake, Rachel Garst, Keith Dorpinghaus.



Great Places application in the works

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weaknesses in within each dimension. Those seven dimensions are 1) a unique sense of place; 2) engaging experiences; 3) a rich social fabric; 4) a vital economy; 5) a pleasing environment; 6) a strong foundation; and 7) a creative culture. The team will then use the profile to identify where Coon Rapids can take advantage of state programs to become a truly Great Place.

Around 75 coaches from state government agencies have been dispatched in teams to all the 145 'places' that have submitted invitations. These coaches will help the places identify next steps and assess their readiness to present offers to the Great Places Citizen Advisory Board to be considered one of three pilot Great Places. The board will select three pilots in early October.

Each and every one of the 145 places that extended invitations will benefit from the Great Places initiative through the coaching process and an opportunity to work with and understand how state agencies work, according to IDCA director Anita Walker. "The three pilot Great Places will be part of our learning laboratory in this first year of Great Places, during which the state will explore coordinated, focused ways to deliver technical and financial assistance to deliver power results."

Two coaches arrived in Coon Rapids on Monday for their initial introduction with local Great Places team members. During the four-plus hour meeting with the coaches, local team members discussed in detail how well the Coon Rapids area fits within each of the seven dimensions and the gaps that exist. Much of the shared information was compiled through several preliminary meetings held during the past two weeks. While the details in Coon Rapids' Great Place offer has yet to be determined, it is clear that one large element in its offer will include the newly created Whiterock Conservancy and its 5000 acres of river valley, timber, pasture, prairie and wetlands. Many, many other elements of the Coon Rapids offer which fall into one or several of the seven dimensions are currently being prioritized by the local Great Places team.

Both Carpenter and Garst are realistic about the chances for Coon Rapids to be chosen as one of the three pilot projects. Yet they are convinced that Coon Rapids' final Great Places offer will be in the running.

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